DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 263 IR 007 555

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TITLE The Linking Agent and FLS: Research Supported Assumptions about Linkage.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Environment; Educational Research; *Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Networks; Information Utilization; Inservice Education; Models; Problem Solving; *Staff Role
IDENTIFIERS Educational Information; *Florida Linkage System; *Linking Agents

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Florida Linkage System (FLS), which was designed to help schools throughout the state improve their problem-solving processes and knowledge utilization. While the system's goals are listed and a model for its linkage strategy is outlined, the major portion of the report discusses three findings about the linkage strategy and implications for the linking agent's role in each: (1) money and information networks are important but not sufficient to effect changes in educational practice; (2) continuously available help from a process agent, i.e., a linker, sustains school-based commitment; (3) training which enhances the professional climate of schools by improving the process skills of teachers and administrators (e.g., communication, leadership, planning, and decision making), as well as their problem identification and solution selection skills, is effective. (Author/JD)

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THE LINKING AGENT AND FLS: RESEARCH SUPPORTED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LINKAGE

Paper Prepared for the Symposium:

Recent Findings from the Florida Linkage System:
Implications for R & D Utilization and Self-Renewal in Schools

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
San Francisco, April 9-13, 1979.

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THE LINKING AGENT AND FLS: RESEARCH SUPPORTED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LINKAGE

A review of the literature as well as a review of the field shows that the term linkage agent has as many definitions, functions, and characteristics as there are existing linkers. A linker may be an individual, a small group, or an organization. A linker may be external or internal or a combination of both. A linker may be school-based, university-based, district-based, or state-based. What then is a linkage agent and what does one do? For the past two years, the Florida Linkage System (FLS), an R & D Utilization Project funded by the National Institute of Education, has been conducting action research to provide an answer to this question.

The FLS is a linkage strategy built upon the assumptions that a) an effective linkage strategy is "user centered" in design and operation, and b) constant interaction between the user and a technically and interpersonally skilled facilitator and linkage agent is central to problem identification and solution. A review of these assumptions and the situations of schools and dissemination activities in Florida provides the basis for the goals of the Florida Linkage System. These goals are listed below:

1. To diagnose factors which impair student performance in the basic skills.

2. To link schools with the best available educational programs to meet their needs.

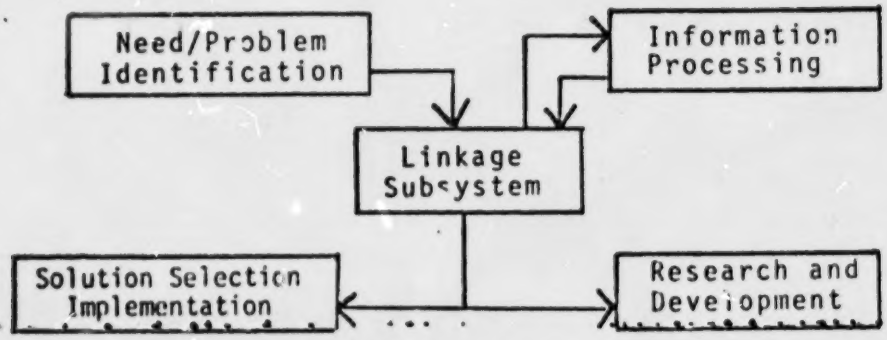
3. To link schools with people who can provide expert technical assistance.

4. To help schools identify the financial resources required to implement solutions to their concerns.

5. To build the capacity of schools to solve local concerns.

Thus, this linkage strategy is designed to help schools throughout the state improve their problem solving processes and knowledge utilization. The problem solving focuses on the school's efforts to identify organizational and instructional concerns and then choose and implement the best ways to deal with these concerns. Knowledge utilization, part of the problem solving process, involves activities from gathering information (products of educational research and development), analyzing the information, and deciding what to do with the information.

The model for this strategy has five major subsystems. The subsystems are interrelated and flow from need problem identification through linkage, to information processing and research and development; and finally to selection and implementation of a solution.



A key to this model is the linkage subsystem which connects the four other subsystems. The project uses eight teacher education centers as the primary linkage agencies. Within these agencies, there are several types of linkers. One type of linker could fit into a category of one who knows where to locate information and resources. Examples of these linkers could be consultants within the State Department of Education, curriculum coordinators within a district, professors within a university setting, or directors of a teacher education center. A second type of linker is one who is not only an information retriever but is also a process change agent. Within the structure of this project, each teacher education center has a person employed to serve this role. The linkage subsystem is considered the domain of the teacher education center linker. The activities of this second type of linker plus the FLS strategy are providing a viable framework for improving schools within Florida. Observations, participation, field reports, and formative evaluation data have yielded insights regarding the assumptions and goals of the Florida Linkage System. The remainder of this paper will discuss several of these findings about the linkage strategy and implications for the linking agent role performance with regard to each finding.

Money and information networks are important but not sufficient to effect changes in educational practice. Local involvement and commitment of the persons responsible for implementation of innovations is essential and is affected more by local personal and professional concerns than by external factors.

The idea that money and information is not enough to affect change is important for linkers to listen to and also incorporate into strategies they use witn schools. For a linker to come into a school, offer money to be used to buy a solution to solve a problem, and then think real change is going to occur without other efforts is naive. Several things can and do happen which keep effective and enduring change from taking place. For example, linkers have found that in some instances if the initial and primary contact is with the school administration, the money and information may never or, at the most, very slowly get to the teacher level. The administration may have other priorities or take this as an opportunity to use the money for one of their ideas. In some schools, linkers find that spending the money becomes an end in itself and subverts time being spent on identifying and analyzing problems and solutions. Prevalent attitudes in schools where this occurs are,"let's hurry and get this money spent before they take it away", or "let's look in the catalogues and find as many things as we can to purchase with our money". In a few instances where teachers were involved in the money and information dissemination, linkers note that initial activities seem to center on finding pretty packages rather than research based ideas. (Linkers identify poor

preparation of teachers for involvement in decision making activities and not having previously shared in budget activities at the school as contributing to this type of package purchasing.)

Needless to say, it is difficult to insure commitment to solution implementation when involvement is minimal. Perhaps this is one reason research products are viewed with little credibility among practitioners. Money and information are provided to schools but there is no process to assist schools in using these resources effectively. The school gets money, buys a solution, and stops using it after several months. No one understands, internalizes, or plans for the change. Thus, the attitude that research products are not effective is nurtured. Project linkers believe that the participants in the change must own the change. To take this a step farther, the linkers think that a sense of "ownership" in a change process implies involvement, understanding, shared decision making, time, patience, frustration, and sometimes conflict. Money and information alone cannot assure ownership. The linker's job cannot be one of information retrieval solely. The linkage agent needs to attend to change process also. In the linker's efforts to mobilize the school to look at "where it is" and "where it ought or wants to go", the agent needs to begin by assessing the readiness of the school for improvement. Commitment is essential and can be built into each stage of the process. It is important to have activities coincide with the readiness stages and levels of each school. If these are not

matched appropriately, frustrations and conflicts may become excessive, there may have to be a back up process, and, in the end, implementations may not be long lasting.

The FLS linkers find several questions helpful in planning strategies to facilitate commitment at the school level. These include:

1. Are the administration and staff in agreement that an instructional or organizational problem may exist which may necessitate change?
2. Has the staff been asked if they want to participate or have they been told they will participate in the proposed activities?
3. Is the principal willing to try shared decision making? (It has been observed that although the principal is a key factor in the change process, he/she does not have to be actively involved. A passive participation, that is, an allowing of activities to occur, can produce the same results).
4. How much involvement have the teachers previously had in decision making in this school?
5. Is there evidence of mutual trust and support?
6. How much time has the staff previously devoted to meetings and how much time are they willing to devote in the future?
7. Is there a communication network already established and functioning at the school?
8. Does the school staff have the skills necessary for effective communication, problem solving, and analysis so ownership can be facilitated?
9. Are there any union or district arrangements that may affect the improvement effort?

These questions are by no means exhaustive but do provide a beginning for linkers to work from. Once these questions are

addressed and activities are structured to deal with the levels of readiness for school improvement, a mere handout of money and information becomes a process which builds commitment into change efforts. It is then the job of the linker to find or design ways to move the faculty from its present level of readiness through the process to ownership and finally institutionalization. Money and information are important but are not the sole answer to school improvement. FLS linkers suggest using money and information as the vehicle to facilitate changes in educational practices.

Continuously available help from a process agent, i.e., a linker, sustains school-based commitment. This linker has to be responsive and sensitive to teacher needs and also provide non-threatening aid and guidance without usurping the professional prerogatives of school-based people.

The FLS linkage agents bear out this finding time and time again through their experiences. There are two questions linkers need to consider when attending to this finding: a) why is on-going help to schools important, and b) how does a linker get to the stage where schools will accept this on-going help? The project linkers have found that schools need supportive assistance for several reasons and also that delivery of this assistance comes in different forms. These include:

1. Limited time - Schools have limited flexible time and staffs have full time responsibilities. Linkers can take care of tasks such as meeting arrangements, phone calls, etc., so school administrators and teachers can use what time they do have for quality participation in activities.

2. Frustration - Schools, as well as individuals within the schools, have frustration levels that deserve attention. The skilled linker senses this and assists in dealing with it. Linkers, for example, have seen a need to decrease, increase, or change activities, or maybe request additional consultant assistance.

3. Fear - Change is anxiety producing and help can come from the linkers in the form of support and encouragement. This support may be as simple as listening to a principal's concerns about a problem, a smile, or just being at the school.

4. Lack of information or skills - Since many schools have not been involved in a cooperative venture in making decisions, some steps along the way may call for information or skills not available. The linker may be able to supply these or find someone who can.

The answer to the second concern, how to move schools to utilize assistance, is not so simple. Before many schools will allow help, much less on-going help from an outside resource, several things must happen. These prerequisites to a partner relationship between a school and a linker are commonly discussed in terms of legitimacy, credibility, and entry. Since most of the linkers in this project have begun this role as first time combination linkers, information retrievers plus process change agents; and research on linker behavior has been limited, the "how to's" for gaining credibility have not been readily available. Linkers now know that to expect to show up at a school and be welcomed with open arms is very unusual. Teachers and administrators are accustomed to having outsiders come in and tell them what to do, not help them help themselves. Linkers have to overcome this perception before support is accepted. This entry process varies in complexity and length of time. In the project, one linker has gained credibility in two months in one school while it has taken one year in another school within the same district. It is because of this very individualness of each school that a linker be sensitive and perceptive of a faculty's readiness level to be moved towards change. In addition, linkers need to be sensitive to their own style, status within their organization, skills, and

needs. Once this need for sensitivity is recognized, the goal of gaining the trust of a school staff is underway.

Project linkers have experienced several methods for establishing credibility. Three of the linkers have previously been in the district as curriculum coordinators and have worked with the schools in an information exchange capacity. Their gaining access to the schools has been a more natural entry than those linkers who have just moved into this position. One of the first time linkers, just leaving the classroom after seven years of experience, relates that her ability to go into a classroom and assist teachers, talk with teachers in the lounge about day to day survival concerns, and even substitute on occasions has contributed to a mutual respect, trust, and openness. It appears to be crucial to be frequently visible at the school site and to listen and respond to what are simple needs of teachers but necessary for smoother and happier daily functioning. For example, when one linker would hear talk that teachers' editions are needed, the linker finds those items; if lounge bulletin boards have pleas for popsicle sticks, newspapers, comic books, etc., the linker makes contributions. This type of response is an easy way to communicate the linker's interest to the teachers. In addition, it is important to be aware that along with business during planning periods, there must be time for a Tab, some humor, and a little relaxation. Being on time, being prepared, and being responsive but not pushy also help with entry. Essentially, linkers need to let school administrators and teachers know that they care, they are willing to work, and they want to be a support person, not an

"I have the answer" person. This eventually leads to a partner relationship between the school and linker. It is this partner relationship that provides the basis for the continuous helping role of the linker. This on-going relationship is partially established during the entry phase. In fact, there is no distinct line that defines where entry ends and where the helping role begins. The linker role is one of change and movement. As this role expands, the agent must be aware of signs which indicate a tendency to overtake roles and responsibilities of teachers and administrators. On the other hand, there may be a tendency to create a dependency situation. Once again, the importance of the linker to be sensitive and knowledable not only about school-based personnel but also sensitive to what the linker role is all about. Perhaps if the linker keeps in mind that success is not creating a long lasting relationship with a school but having the school eventually handle problem solving and knowledge utilization on its own, the establishment of a supportive relationship will be easier to attain.

Training which enhances the professional climate of schools by improving process skills such as communication, leadership, planning, and decision making, as well as problem identification and solution selection skills of teachers and administrators, is effective.

Linkers quickly learn that teachers and administrators do care about their students and want to improve the educational practices at their school. Sometimes it is difficult for improvement to occur because the individuals within the school are not at similar skill levels and this causes productive movement to become stifled. This calls for linker awareness and diagnosis which may lead to training for the staff.

Readiness levels seem to fit into three categories:

1. Schools needing skills in communication and organization. Meeting this need has to occur before effective problem solving takes place.
2. Schools needing skills in group problem solving.
3. Schools ready for information dissemination and shared involvement and decision making.

These categories have been useful to linkers in assisting them to diagnose school readiness levels with regard to training implications. Once a school is diagnosed, training can then be planned and implemented.

In this project, facilitator teams (the principal and two other elected staff members) have participated in a week long

awareness workshop regardless of their readiness stage. This type of activity allows for staff members to establish a common vocabulary and also identity within the project. This experience has been the basis for future training . Any training following this initial activity has been school-based and has related to individual and school needs. Sometimes linkers deliver the training in formal inservice sessions, usually conducted after school. One linker relates that her most effective training technique is modeling and "over the shoulder" assistance. For several of the linkers, much of their training has been transferable and helpful to both teachers and administrators at the school level. In most instances, training has been adapted by the linkers.

Observations and interviews with school staff indicate that training has been effective. School personnel themselves are the first to comment on differences within their schools. Teachers report that:

> "There was never much communication before we went through the training. Now we turn to each other and work out our problems."
>
> "There is an entirely different feeling among the faculty at this school compared to faculties at other schools. There is a definite difference; you feel it when you talk with them and work with them in any way. The training joins everybody in a closer force."
>
> "We felt that establishing a communication system and developing individual teacher skills and skills of working with each other was probably going to be the biggest thing we got out of it...it can be ongoing from now on."

Because training is important, it must be carefully planned. When organizing inservice for school teachers and administrators, project linkers have found the following guidelines helpful:

1. Consultants need to gain a level of entry with the school personnel. A linker can help facilitate this.
2. Consultants should be matched with the personality of each school.
3. Training needs to relate to local school situations and tasks. It is important that inservice not be viewed as an extra exercise.
4. Release time or stipends for teachers facilitates quality participation in activities.
5. Supportive training is more effective than "one-time" sessions.

In summary, the past two years of action research conducted through the Florida Linkage System, is beginning to produce evidence that supports the assumptions identified as the basis for this project.